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IS JUDAISM NECESSARY TO-DAY?

BY ABRAM S. ISAACS.

A FEW months ago two friends were discussing the subject of the various religions; the one a Presbyterian, a lawyer by profession; the other an Israelite, a physician of repute. In the course of the conversation the lawyer was asked his opinion of Judaism. "To tell you frankly," the reply came, without any hesitation, "I regard it as entirely unnecessary to-day. The world can get along without it. Its work ended long ago. All that is good and useful in it has been utilized by other creeds." When he was further questioned to account for its survival he rejoined: "Why, it is purely an arrested development, interesting as an archæological study, that is all. Of course I admit that I have met very few Jews and have read little, if anything, about their religion or history."

There is nothing exceptional or exaggerated in this statement. The *Ilium fuit* argument applied to Judaism, the view that it is essentially an anachronism in the currents of these later centuries and in an atmosphere of Yankee notions, is by no means rare. If it is not more frequently expressed, possibly out of motives of delicacy, it is held none the less tenaciously. Judaism's work is closed, so it is asserted, sagely; it has no further *raison d'être*. If now and then a Jew does appear on the world's stage and competes for recognition he is as superfluous as would be an old-time Etruscan. He can tell us nothing new. And as for his religion, his rites, customs, ceremonies, his doctrines and literature, why, that is merely for the museum of antiquities along with other theological pterodactyls. This is not the Mesozoic age—who wishes to breathe again the Judean atmosphere?

That Judaism should be regarded as unnecessary is due

mainly to two special causes. The first springs from the density of popular ignorance. When Marlowe pictured Barabbas as poisoner of wells, he was merely giving the popular idea of a Jew. When Shakespeare symbolized in Shylock the spirit of revenge as the Jew's chief characteristic he was also presenting the current notion—any figure like Nathan the Wise or Daniel Deronda, if at all thinkable in that era, would have been hooted from the stage. With the ages, naturally, there has been a gratifying improvement in the popular conception, despite the cheap vaudeville and the vulgar comic weekly; but how absurd and untrue the caricature that still prevails! How can it be otherwise? Greece and Rome find a conspicuous place in the school text-book—the history of the Jew is limited to a few pages, ending with the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, when two thousand years of wandering through the world's *Via dolorosa*, a record thrilling, eventful, of far-reaching consequences, receives absolutely no mention. In standard works on education Judaism is considered a negligible quantity, although long before the medieval schoolmasters the rabbis were teachers of what in large measure might be called the new education. In pretentious volumes on the history of religions Judaism, if discussed at all, is restricted practically to the era of the Old Testament, all later developments being omitted as without historic significance. In a recently issued work, devoted to what has been done in the United States for the year, all sects and creeds being duly chronicled, no provision was made in the schedule for American Judaism, with two million adherents, so unnecessary did it appear.

When the scholar, the theologian, the historian, who certainly should foster the broadest ideals, are satisfied with partial knowledge and unjust discrimination, what wonder that the people continue in their ignorance. The average pulpit, the teacher of the multitude, presents the Jew without flesh and blood, a mere ghostly shadow of the centuries between the Testaments, an unsubstantial echo of a far-away epoch. That popular ignorance is the favorite soil for antipathies, social and religious, cannot be disputed. Hence when the scholar underrates or ignores Judaism as a living factor in the world's betterment, a force to be reckoned with in the history of civilization, he is but forging a link in the chain of prejudice, with its hateful consequences. Happily,

there are scholars not a few who rise above such colossal ignorance and are proud to exclaim with Barthelemy Saint Hilaire in Senator Millaud's "*Petites Pages*," "Never conquered, always erect, as courageous as it is resigned, Israel shines in the world like a torch throughout the ages."

The second contributing factor to present-day ignorance of Judaism has been the Jew himself. While not primarily responsible for the medieval Ghetto into which he was cast like a hunted criminal, he is at fault if in lands that assure him civil and religious freedom he retains a trace of the Ghetto spirit, any aloofness or exclusiveness, any peculiarity or attitude that may single him out as an alien for which his religion and not his personal idiosyncrasies is blamed. It is possible, however, to be too exacting in this connection—it takes time to abandon habits bred by centuries of oppression. The truly representative Israelite knows how to discriminate between essentials and non-essentials in his creed and practise, and, save in the synagogue, is indistinguishable in character, motive, appearance, manner from his neighbor who goes to church. A man or woman of that type enters zealously into the life of the general community, promotes the public welfare, is a useful citizen of the commonwealth, whose highest interest he makes his own. If he strives to advance art, music, science, education, benevolence, no question of creed is considered. His Americanism, his patriotic fervor, is a vital part of his religion. Men like Haym Solomon, who sacrificed his fortune for the American cause in the darkest period of the Revolution with a reckless disregard for collateral which no financier of our time would dream of imitating; or Judah Touro, who fought at New Orleans under Jackson and devoted his wealth in public and private beneficence; or Julius Hallgarten, whose large bequests went to education without regard to race, creed and color, not to allude to the rapidly increasing list of men and women who identify themselves with public movements without, however, neglecting the appealing cry of their needy brethren in the flesh—such examples are shining texts which rob popular prejudice of much of its sting. But many have still to discriminate between substance and shadow, reality and counterfeit, in their ancestral religion and its traditions, which have become so closely intermingled that more than ordinary heroism is required to cut the knot. Until they have learned the lesson, and have aban-

doned their voluntary Ghetto, with its narrowness and conceit, they have largely to blame themselves for such ignorance and antipathy as are encountered.

Now waiving further consideration of the two factors that are mainly responsible for current notions as to Judaism, let us briefly consider what are the qualities in a religion which make it necessary to-day. Let us ignore for the moment theological claims and assumptions that are to be met in the history of all creeds and which are possibly the secret of their weakness as well as their strength. Let us give precedence rather to the positive and practical elements.

A religion must first be rational—it must appeal to the reason and not stultify human intelligence as the fundamental basis of belief. It must concern itself primarily with the lives and welfare of its adherents on earth and not dwell needlessly on the delights and terrors of another world, angelic raptures, demonic frenzies. Its ethical strength must be without a flaw—there must be no dallying with the moral principle for self-aggrandizement. Its ultimate aim must be human betterment, not the extirpation of all who hold other views. Macaulay could not have crystallized the matter more tersely when he wrote that the doctrine of bigotry is simply this: “I am in the right and you are in the wrong. When you are the stronger you agree to tolerate me, for it is your duty to tolerate truth. But when I am the stronger I shall persecute you, for it is my duty to persecute error.” A religion, finally, must make its followers better, more helpful, more blessed, so that its influence shall be recognized more and more for good.

Before we ask, How does Judaism meet this definition of a necessary religion (within present limitations it is impossible to enter more thoroughly into the subject), let us put the question, What is Judaism? That is the crux of the discussion. It is not the religion of the Patriarchs, the Pentateuch, the Prophets only. It is ethical monotheism colored by the history of the Jewish people and is a development ever continuing as that people or race or religious body survives from age to age, from clime to clime. It is not restricted to the Old Testament and the surroundings of Palestine. That environment marked only its point of origin. As the real history of the Jew may be said to have begun with the Roman’s capture of Jerusalem, when he

exchanged a strip of soil for the universe, so his religion, which is not Mosaism or Rabbinism, but Judaism, attained its greatest breadth when the sacrificial era closed, prayer became the substitute for burnt offering, and school and synagogue spread in every land. Ideals change, customs vary, opinions clash, and out of this everlasting conflict Judaism attains new life and vigor. That is one secret of its survival. The very legalism which is such a constituent part of the Jewish religion and which is usually criticised as repressive and narrowing became a balance-wheel for character and conduct.

Naturally, this view will be sharply challenged by those who have made Judaism a convenient dummy or veritable taboo. There are many who conscientiously limit the religion of the Jew to the Old Testament. The modern Jew, they assert, is a degenerate, his religion a counterfeit, if not a danger to the children of light. The testimony of history, the story of rabbinical development, with the wider dispersion after the Roman triumph, the influence of the Talmud, the spread of the schools East and West, the tremendous upheaval with the discovery of America, the Reformation, the French Revolution; these have given new form and color to the Jew's thought and made the Biblical era almost like his kindergarten. Such a view of the situation is utterly ignored by those who have long preached Judaism's funeral sermon and cannot understand why its obsequies are indefinitely postponed. Everything is ready but the corpse.

Bearing in mind, then, this juster conception of Judaism as embracing every era in its history, past and present, how far does it meet our definition of a necessary religion?

Judaism is rational, for its fundamental doctrines are in accord with human intelligence. These are the Unity of God and the unity of mankind, which forms a common brotherhood, even as the Deity is the Father of all races and creeds. Its ideal is universal peace and righteousness, to be brought about by the gradual diffusion of justice, kindness and humility. Its aim is the attainment of the perfect life among its adherents, which its rites and ceremonies have in view and to which they are subordinated. Its ethics are unsurpassed for breadth and beauty—they have become so absorbed and utilized that the world fails to recognize the debt. It plants itself on earth and speculates little about the next world, preferring to make a heaven of earth instead

of transplanting the passions and weaknesses of earth to heaven. Its highest conception of the future is of all creeds and nations acknowledging one God and worshipping as brethren. It seeks no proselytes: all who lead pious lives, whatever their creed or race, inherit eternal bliss is its traditional saying. And it has held to this gracious optimism despite two thousand years of travail. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," "Have we not all One Father?" are its golden texts for all time.

Undoubtedly one clew, however slight, to the opinion that Judaism is unnecessary, is found in its disinclination to proselytize. One is accustomed to associate some system of propaganda, an active, aggressive tendency with a living faith. Apparently the objection that Max Müller decades ago uttered against Judaism as being inert without the missionary spirit carries a certain amount of weight. Hence as it makes no outside stir, is concerned directly with its own adherents and gives no thought to the world's salvation as demanding its interference, it is likely to be regarded as less necessary than a more militant organization. But there is a twofold reason for this apathy. In the first place, the Jews have never had the power to make propaganda even if they desired and the synagogue polity favored such a course. It would have been suicidal, if one considers the conditions under which they have existed. Then, too, the Jew, realizing the beauty and excellence in the life and aspiration of the non-Jew, feels that the offshoots of Judaism, what the Germans call its "daughter religions," are doing God's work. As a matter of history, however, it is false to assume that Judaism has always been a passionless block—it has numbered illustrious converts; but these have come without conscious effort, even in Roman days when Juvenal grew sarcastic at the Jew's expense and the synagogue was visited by men and women of noble rank. Why, however, should it compass sea and earth to make a proselyte? What was to be gained? Mere numerical strength was of little consequence to a people whose consoling hope was the saving remnant. And as for power, dominion, wealth, had not the prophet proclaimed of old—"not by might, but by my spirit"?

It is, however, the survival of Judaism, with its essential belief still powerful, its hold on its adherents practically unchanged, its ethical platform broad and inspiring; in other

words, its vitality undimmed, that proves its right to be called a religion necessary to-day. When Tennyson wrote,

"From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go,'"

he did not think of any possible exception to the law of destruction that overwhelms nations and creeds as well as cliff and stone. May not Judaism, without any undue boastfulness, claim to be such an exception? A religion that has survived so much cannot be unnecessary. A vitality that has stood persecution-proof for ages must have a further part to play. If the thought of Emerson be true, "Every lash inflicted is a tongue of flame, every prison a more illustrious abode, every burnt book or house enlightens the world," the practical crucifixion of an entire race for nearly twenty centuries because it refused to be disloyal to its flag is the most powerful proof that it must possess a message and a warning necessary in some form for mankind to-day.

Judaism has had the hardest kind of a fight from the beginning. It has had to uplift itself from idolatry and materialism. Its entire history has been a discipline of suffering—a process of chastening. But it has caught some share of the truth and it is needed to emphasize that portion. If it has not realized its ideals, is not this the fate of humanity in general? Yet the mind and heart of the race have been so trained in the school of trial, its intellect so exercised, when any other people would have fallen in the mire and been lost by the way, that there is not a field to which it has been grudgingly admitted which its representatives have not adorned. Art, music, science, law, medicine, finance, philology, the useful trades, philanthropy, has not the Jew's record in these departments of effort been notable in but a single century of emancipation? Surely a religion that can produce such illustrious workers from Josef Israels to Moses Montefiore cannot but be necessary to-day. And as to the future, it will be more necessary as the world's attitude changes and the Jew himself wisely and reverently can give more thought to the changeless spirit and ideals of Judaism than to transient forms, symbols and customs, which, while they may protect and preserve vital principles too often obscure, distort and stifle the truth.

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